

A NEW SUBSPECIES OF THE WESTERN GRASS-WREN, *AMYTORNIS
TEXTILIS* (DUMONT) IN NORTH-WESTERN QUEENSLAND

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Until lately, real evidence of the occurrence of the desert genus *Amytornis* Stejneger in Queensland has been lacking, although Keast (1958) referred to a possible record of an unidentified species in the far south-west, near Bulloo Lake. Further reports of a grass-wren in the Cloncurry–Mount Isa district have given rise to speculation concerning the identity of all these birds.

The genus is characterised by the occurrence of numerous small, isolated populations, which have undergone morphological differentiation partly as a result of such isolation. In some instances, these relict populations, or “isolates” (Keast, 1958, p. 34) have attained species rank; in others, the differences are subspecific. It could be expected, therefore, that grass-wrens in Queensland would differ from those found elsewhere and, following the taking of museum specimens, such has proved to be the case. The Bulloo birds belong to a new species of the “*striatus* type” (Favaloro and McEvey, 1968) whilst those obtained near Mt. Isa can be assigned to an undescribed race of *Amytornis textilis* (Dumont), the so-called Western Grass-Wren of the Official Checklist (1926). The two specimens from the Mount Isa area, obtained by Mr. R. K. Carruthers, had been tentatively determined by Mr. D. P. Vernon of the Queensland Museum as *Amytornis textilis*. Subsequently, they were submitted to the writer for further examination.

Amytornis textilis ballarae subsp. nov.

MATERIAL EXAMINED

HOLOTYPE: Adult female, Qd Mus. O10692. Collected July 17, 1966, R. K. Carruthers. Wing, 60 mm; tail, 75; culmen (exposed) 10·4; culmen (total) 14; tarsus, 23; total length, 147; wing span, 180. Gonads not enlarged (4 x 2·5 mm). Iris, “dark brown”; bill, upper and lower, “horn brown”; base of lower mandible, “dark grey”; legs and feet, “dark brown”.

PARATYPE: Adult female, Qd Mus. O11011. Collected October 27, 1966, R. K. Carruthers. Wing, 60 mm; culmen (exposed) 10·4; tarsus, 23; tail worn; total length, 159; wing span, 171; weight, 19 gm. In partial moult (tail), gonads not enlarged.

TYPE LOCALITY: Six miles south of Mary Kathleen, near Ballara copper mine, east-southeast of Mount Isa, north-western Queensland.

DIAGNOSIS: Sides of body and flanks deep reddish brown (“Liver Brown” of Ridgway, 1912, plate XIV); edgings of buffy-white feathers of throat and upper breast deep reddish brown; general colour of back and rump about the same as that of flanks but becoming somewhat paler in worn plumage.

DISTRIBUTION: So far as known, restricted to the Mount Isa area, specimens having been taken at the type locality and at Sybella Creek.

REMARKS: *A. t. ballarae* is a small, short-tailed rufous form which resembles members of related populations in the Macdonnell Ranges (*purnelli*), Everard Ranges (*everardi*) and near Tennant Creek. It differs in being much deeper rufous brown below: the ventral coloration of the two last-named is towards cinnamon ("Wood Brown" of Ridgway, 1912, pl. 50).

The single specimen from near Tennant Creek, a male collected on May 22, 1962 is rather pale but for the present may be referred to *purnelli*. As mentioned by Storr (1967), reports of "*purnelli*" from Barrow Creek and Coniston, Northern Territory require confirmation. If one followed the nomenclature of the current Official Checklist, all these birds would comprise the central Australian "species" *Amytornis purnelli*, Dusky Grass-Wren. However, Keast (1958) has shown that the *purnelli* group of populations is merely a geographical representative of the Western Grass-Wren, *Amytornis textilis*, whose known range extends from Eyre Peninsula, South Australia (subspecies *myall*) through the interior of Western Australia to coastal regions near Point Cloates in the north (subspecies *textilis*) and inland in the southwest (subspecies *macrourus*).

In all subspecies females are more rufous on the flanks than males. General body coloration shows little rufous in the nominate form and in *macrourus* Gould, which are dull brown above and below. In the last-named, the tail is exceedingly long (91–100 mm, according to Keast), the head is rather dark and the abdomen not pale but brownish like the breast. The race named *myall* by Mathews is distinguished by its shorter tail (83 mm), whitish throat and abdomen, and slightly more rufous dorsal coloration than in *textilis* and *macrourus*.

Keast has drawn attention to the slightly greater dimensions of the bill and tail in *everardi*, viz. 10.7 and 80 mm.

The discovery of the Western Grass-Wren in north-western Queensland has increased our knowledge and understanding of the former distribution of the species, which must have been fragmented by the ecological changes arising from the climatic fluctuations during and since the Pleistocene. North-south shifts of the desert belt would have resulted in the disappearance of suitable habitats over a wide area and such changes, catastrophic to sedentary forms, would account for the present "spotty" distribution.

LITERATURE CITED

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